Needs Analysis
An Important Aspect of Planning

Executive Planning

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ABSTRACT

In 1991 the Range Complex Fire Department (RCFD) purchased an Emergency Information System (EIS) to aid in the dispatch and management of personnel and equipment during hazardous materials emergencies. The problem is that the RCFD has spent a large amount of money on the purchase of this program and for the training of personnel to operate it. The RCFD does not utilize this system because it does not fit the department's needs. As a result the RCFD may not be managing emergency situations as effectively and efficiently as possible.

The purpose of this paper was to discern if a needs analysis was conducted by the RCFD prior to purchasing EIS, and if not, would a needs analysis have helped prevent the purchase of the wrong emergency information management software program. The historical method of research was used. The research questions were:

1. What are the national and federal standards covering emergency information management systems?
2. What information is there on needs analysis?
3. What other fire departments, if any, conduct a needs analysis as part of their planning process?
4. What do RCFD personnel that use the current information system know about its capabilities and do they believe it is the right system for their department?
5. How did the RCFD personnel involved in the decision to purchase the current emergency information management system reach their decision?

A literature review was conducted to locate information on the needs analysis phase of planning. Thirty five surveys were used to find out if other fire departments utilize needs analysis as part of their planning process. Thirty four surveys were used to gauge firefighters knowledge and perception of the current information system. Two personal interviews were conducted to discover how the decision was made by RCFD personnel to purchase the current emergency information management system.

The research did not locate any national or federal standards dealing with emergency information management systems. The literature review revealed that problem identification, utilization of multiple sources of information, needs prioritization, stakeholder involvement, and management commitment were key issues in conducting a needs analysis. The EFO student surveys indicated that the vast majority of students believed in the use of needs analysis. The firefighter surveys indicated the firefighters knew very little about the current information management system. RCFD personnel involved in the purchase of the emergency information management system did not conduct a needs analysis prior to purchase.

The recommendations were that the RCFD senior officers attend the Executive Planning course at the National Fire Academy. All mid-level officers should be trained in planning in general and specifically, needs analysis. A needs analysis should be conducted prior to changes in departmental processes, policies, or procedures. The RCFD mission statement should be re-written, disseminated and explained to members. The EIS issue should be revisited.

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INTRODUCTION

Today's fire service is no different from other businesses when it comes to dealing with the current economic environment. Senior fire officers are expected to manage their department's budget effectively. There is no longer enough "fat" in today's fire department budgets to allow for fiscal mistakes. One of the tools available to the fire service manager to help ensure that money is spent wisely is the needs analysis.

In 1991 the RCFD purchased an Emergency Information System (EIS) to aid in the dispatch and management of personnel and equipment during emergencies. The problem is that the RCFD has spent a large amount of money on the purchase of this program and for the training of personnel to operate it. The RCFD does not utilize this system because it does not fit the department's needs. As a result the RCFD may not be managing emergency situations as effectively and efficiently as possible.

The purpose of this paper was to discern if a needs analysis was conducted by the RCFD prior to purchasing EIS, and if not, would a needs analysis have helped prevent the purchase of the wrong emergency information management software program.

The historical method of research was used for this paper. The research consisted of a literature review, a survey of current EFO students, a survey of RCFD personnel, and two personal interviews with RCFD involved with the purchase of EIS. The survey of the EFO students was used to gain information on the use of needs analysis in other departments. The RCFD personnel survey was used to measure the level of knowledge within the department

about EIS. The two interviews were conducted to find out what the thought process was in deciding to purchase the EIS software program.

The following research questions were utilized in the preparation of this paper:

1. What are the national or federal standards covering emergency information management systems?
2. What information is there on needs analysis?
3. What other fire departments, if any, conduct a needs analysis as part of their planning process?
4. What do RCFD personnel that use the current information system know about its capabilities and do they believe it is the right system for the department?
5. How did the RCFD personnel involved in the decision to purchase the current emergency information management system reach their decision?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Range Complex Fire Department (RCFD) is a federal fire department located in Nevada. The initial mission of the RCFD was to provide only two services, aircraft crash fire fighting and structural fire protection. Over the years the department has evolved to provide many additional services such as; hazardous materials response and mitigation, medical response and transport, confined space rescue, and high angle rescue. In addition the fire prevention bureau has been added and provides plans review, fire inspections, extinguisher maintenance and education, public fire education, and arson investigation services.

It is understood that information such as population served, when the fire department was organized and other information about the organization is generally discussed in this section. Due to security constraints that information cannot be discussed in this paper.

The Executive Planning student manual defines needs analysis as looking at the department's current system and its future direction and determining the gap between them. The RCFD does not conduct a needs analysis before making major purchases and this may have resulted in the following problem.

In 1991 the RCFD purchased a software program, Emergency Information System (EIS). This software is a data base that is used to store and manage information concerning hazardous materials. This information can be accessed for day to day use and for emergency situations. The data base contains information on hazardous materials, type, quantities, locations, and associated hazards. This software can be loaded with information about resources to mitigate all types of emergencies. In addition the program can generate a plume dispersion model to aid in predicting the spread of a hazardous materials release. The problem is that the RCFD has spent a large amount of money on the purchase of this program and for the training of personnel. The RCFD is not utilizing this system because it does not fit the department's needs. As a result the RCFD may not be managing emergency situations as effectively and efficiently as possible.

This research problem is directly related to Chapter 5 of the Executive Planning student manual. The Executive Planning course was presented as part of the Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program at the National Fire Academy. Chapter 5 covers the analysis phase, specifically the needs analysis phase, of the planning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's business environment managers cannot afford to make financial mistakes of any magnitude. Organizations, including the fire department, are being forced to "down-size or right-size" in effort to be more efficient, effective, and more competitive within their area of expertise. Managers must make sure that any new programs, processes or purchases are truly beneficial to their organizations before they implement them. One of the tools available to help managers make the right choices is the needs analysis.

Definition

Ross (1995) defines a needs analysis as a tool used to identify a discrepancy between what is and what should be. Ross states " whenever there is a discrepancy between what is and what should be, there is a need that should be considered". Kaufman (1994) defines needs analysis as "the process for defining the gaps between current and desired results".

Based on the definition, Zemke and Kramlinger (1982) identified three basic questions that are to be answered when doing a needs analysis: Is there a real problem? What are the specifics of the problem, need, or task? What are the most important aspects of the problem, need, or task?

Is there a real problem?

As Wieder (1990) points out, it is not uncommon for people in an organization to not agree that a problem even exists. Even if they do recognize the problem, they may not be to keen on having someone come in and analyze it. Wieder goes on to say that needs analysis should be conducted only when it is wanted and when the information coming out of it is going to be used to benefit the fire department.

McArdle (1996) notes that management support of the needs analysis and problem identification is critical. As he states, " Any workplace intervention must have the support of management as a bare minimum." Ideally, however, support should come from all levels . This will ensure a sense of buy-in among employees.

The literature research revealed that the concept of buy-in or "stakeholder" involvement was a key issue in not only identifying problems but in all aspects of the needs analysis process. Benjamin(1993) believes that managers must listen to their members and staff because they are the ones that must identify the needs. Snead and Porter (1996) carry this concept further by observing that this process calls for considerable involvement of personnel at all levels of the organization. Furthermore, it also demands considerable "bottom-up" input before valid "top-down" decisions can be made. Snead and Porter strengthen there position further by stating that the success of this process depends entirely upon the teamwork and the ongoing commitment of key stakeholders.

The first step in a needs analysis is the identification and the agreement that there is a problem. There must be a consensus between management and the stakeholders that there is a problem that needs to be analyzed.

What are the specifics of the problem, need , or task?

According to Zemke and Kramlinger (1982), in answering this question, the analyst is really trying to make sure that the problem can be identified by more than one source or investigative method. One source of information or a single investigative method should not be relied upon on its own. Several different ways of looking at a problem should be explored before making any final determination.

This is another area of the needs analysis process that must utilize stakeholder involvement. Snead and Porter (1996) advocate the use of structured interviews with all those involved in the process to help identify the problems. Cline and Siebert (1993) also believe the use of interviews is important. They advocate the use of questionnaires to aid in the interview process. Questionnaires can also be used if it is not possible to interview the person. Cline and Siebert caution that interviews be weighed with other data because interviews can be subjective. Cline and Siebert point out that group discussion can also be a useful tool for eliciting information. They note that an interactive environment tends to elicit information that individuals might not bring up on their own. They also urge the analyst to become familiar with the subject that is targeted by reviewing books, journals, and reports on the topic. They also add that it is important to create a guidance group to keep the needs analysis on track. Cline and Siebert believe that this group should be made up of subject matter experts and stakeholders.

Benjamin (1993) believes for this phase of the analysis it is important to look at other organizations around you (your peers) and to study technology surveys conducted by the profession you represent. Benjamin also stresses the importance of including the end user in the process.

The research for this section indicated the importance of using multiple sources of information and multiple data collection methods to ensure and accurate identification of the problem.

What are the most important aspects of the problem, need or task?

Zemke and Kramlinger (1982) state that this question is asking the researcher to prioritize the needs that are found. This will allow for an effective strategy to be developed for

attacking the problem. The research indicated that prioritizing can be based on analyzing critical features of the process, comparison of needs to previously selected criteria or prioritizing according to cost benefit analysis.

Barth (1994) believes that needs should be prioritized by focusing in on the key jobs your company of department performs. Determine critical features according to uses that are essential, desirable and unnecessary. He goes on to say that we must start by establishing the minimum results required to achieve a satisfactory solution; then decide the benefits to be gained from an ultimate solution. He then states that you must compare the results of these scenarios, along with the consequences of doing nothing.

Kaufman (1994) has a similar belief about making a comparison between making a change versus ignoring the problem. However, Kaufman believes that this comparison should be based on cost. He states, " Needs are arranged in priority order on the basis of what it costs to meet the need versus what it costs to ignore it."

Ross (1995) believes that priorities should be based on a comparison of needs to previously selected criteria.

Regardless of what method is used, prioritization of needs is essential to the needs analysis process.

Literature Review Summary

The purpose of this paper was to discern if a needs analysis was conducted by the RCFD prior to purchasing the emergency information system and, if not, would the needs analysis have helped prevent the purchase of the wrong emergency information management software program. The literature review clearly indicated that a needs analysis should be

completed before any major process changes or major purchases are made. The literature review indicated that there are three questions that must be addressed in this process: Is there a real problem? What are the specifics of the problem, need, or task? What are the most important aspects of the problem, need, or task? The literature review pointed out that by answering these questions problems can be identified and solutions offered before a change is made. The review also indicated that management support and stakeholder involvement were also essential to the success of this process. The information found in the review of the literature will be especially useful in formulating the recommendations section of this paper.

PROCEDURES

Literature Research Methodology

The first step in the research process was to locate any books, professional journals, and Executive Fire Officer (EFO) program papers that related to the topic of needs analysis. An initial computer search was conducted in September 1997 at the Learning Resource Center, located at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland. It was also helpful to review the reference lists of the EFO papers. This helped locate additional references not identified by the computer. A computer search was also done in October 1997 at he Clark County Library system in Las Vegas, Nevada and at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Survey Methodology

There were two surveys conducted as part of the research process. One survey was conducted to help answer the research question: What other fire departments, if any,

conduct a needs analysis as part of their planning process? The surveys were mailed out to thirty five current EFO students. The mailing list was compiled from the class rosters of the three previous EFO classes attended by the researcher. The surveys were mailed out the last week in December 1997. The last response was received the third week of January 1998. Of the thirty five surveys that were sent out, twenty nine were filled out and returned to the researcher. Prior to mailing out the surveys three members of the RCFD upper management reviewed and edited the survey for clarity. A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix A.

The second survey was conducted in effort to answer the research question: What do the RCFD personnel that use the current information system know about its capabilities and do they believe it is the right system for their department? These surveys were given to the firefighters currently assigned to the operations division of the RCFD. The surveys were given out and monitored by the Assistant Chiefs of Operations. The surveys were administered, filled out and returned during the week of 11 January 1998. A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix A.

The operations division has forty firefighters. Of the forty operations firefighters, thirty four were surveyed. Six personnel were not available for various reasons. All the personnel surveyed completed and returned their surveys. The surveys were handed out at training sessions. The Assistant Chiefs were briefed on the purpose of the survey by the researcher and were present during the process to answer any questions associated with the survey. The first ten firefighters were used as a pilot group to recommend any changes to the survey that might be needed. The pilot group did not recommend any changes.

Interviews

Two interviews were conducted on 17 February 1998. The two persons interviewed were Captain Greg Crawford, the former Hazardous Materials Captain and Jeff Whisenant the current Hazardous Materials Captain. The purpose of these interviews was to find out how the RCFD personnel involved in the decision to purchase the current information management system reached their decision?

The personnel interviewed were asked the following questions? Was there a specific need identified by the hazardous materials response personnel that lead to the purchase of this system? Were alternatives to EIS researched and compared to EIS? In terms of hazardous materials response, is the department any better off with EIS than it was before the purchase of EIS?

Limitations

Some of the key personnel responsible for the purchase of EIS are no longer members of the RCFD and were not available for interviews. An attempt was made to limit research materials to books and articles published after 1987 to keep the information presented in this paper timely, however, one book published in 1982 was utilized. Due to monetary and time constraints the EFO student surveys were very limited in number.

RESULTS

As a result of the research effort, this section presents specific answers to the each of the original research questions.

1. **What, if any, are the national or federal standards covering emergency information systems?**

A review of National Fire Protection (NFPA) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards and directives did not reveal any standards or guidelines that deal with emergency information systems. A review of the Department of Defense Instructions (DODI's) also failed to uncover any directives on this topic.

2. **What information is there on needs analysis?**

A review of the literature indicated that a needs analysis is an important aspect of the planning process. The review pointed out that the a needs analysis helps identify problems and helps provide potential solutions for them. The literature review identified three questions that are useful for this process. The three question were: Is there a problem? What are the specifics of the problem, need, or task? What are the most important aspects of the problem, need, or task?

The literature review also pointed out he importance of management support of the process as well as stakeholder involvement in the process. Without these two essential elements the needs analysis process will not be effective.

3. What other fire departments, if any, conduct a needs analysis as part of their planning process?

For this portion of the research a survey was mailed out to present EFO candidates. The first section of the survey dealt with basic department demographics pertaining to the person filling out the survey instrument. All respondents worked for either a fully paid or combination department. All respondents worked in a jurisdiction serving a population of at least 25,000 people. All the survey respondents held the rank of Captain or above. Four questions on the survey dealt directly with the use of needs analysis in the planning process. These four questions and the responses to those questions are presented below.

Do you or have you participated in major planning decisions within your department? (If "yes" please provide brief examples.) Eighty six percent (25 of 29) indicated that they did take part in their departments planning process. Fourteen percent (4 of 29) answered no to this question. The most common examples given of the participants involvement in the planning process were, strategic planning, station relocation, apparatus purchases and communication systems upgrades.

Does your department conduct a needs analysis as part of their planning process? Sixty six percent (19 of 29) of the respondents indicated that their department does utilize some form of needs analysis as part of their planning process. Thirty four percent (10 of 29) did not.

Do you believe that a needs analysis is important in the planning process? (Please give a brief explanation for your answer.) One hundred percent (29 of 29) felt that a needs analysis was important. The majority of the explanations dealt with the importance of a needs analysis

for determining future operational and budgetary goals. Four of the respondents felt that a needs analysis played an important role in determining training needs and programs.

Does your department conduct a needs analysis for all major purchases? (If "yes" please provide examples of recent major purchases.) Fifty two percent (15 of 29) indicated that their department does conduct a needs analysis for major purchases. Forty eight percent (14 of 29) do not. The most common examples cited by those that answered yes to this question were apparatus purchases, new station construction and increased staffing.

4. What do the RCFD personnel that use the current information system know about its capabilities and do they believe it is the right system for the department?

To gain answers to this research question a five question survey was given to the operations personnel of the RCFD. The questions and results are presented below.

Do you know what EIS is? (If yes, please describe the purpose of this system.) Fifty six percent (19 of 34) of the personnel survey answered yes to this question, forty four percent (15 of 34) answered no. Although fifty six percent answered yes to the question their descriptions of the purpose of the system indicated that the majority did not understand the full potential of the system.

Do you know how to operate EIS? Twenty six percent (9 of 34) indicated that they did know how to operate the system. Seventy four percent (25 of 34) stated that they did not know how to operate the system.

Do you believe that EIS is a useful tool for Hazardous Materials responses? Twenty one percent (7 of 34) believed it was a good resource tool for hazardous materials responses. Seventy nine percent (27 of 34) did not believe the system was a useful tool.

Briefly explain how EIS is used for a hazardous materials incident. The explanations supplied for this portion of the survey indicated that the respondents had a very limited knowledge of the system. Most indicated that there only knowledge of the system was the plume dispersion model that the system could generate.

Do you believe that EIS is the best software package for our needs? Six percent (2 of 34) responded positively. Eighty five percent felt that the current system does not fit the needs of the department. Nine percent (3 of 34) felt that they did not have enough information to accurately answer the question.

5. How did the RCFD personnel involved in the decision to purchase the current emergency information system reach their decision?

To find out how the decision was made to purchase EIS, two interviews were conducted. The two persons interviewed were Greg Crawford, the Hazardous Materials officer at the time of the purchase and Jeff Whisenant, the current Hazardous Materials officer. Both Captains were involved to some degree in the decision making process. The computer manager that gave the authorization for the purchase of the system is no longer a member of the RCFD and was not available for an interview.

Captain Crawford believed that the only hazardous materials response need that was identified prior to the purchase of EIS was the need for a quickly accessible data base containing information pertaining to various chemicals. He noted that this was a "nice to have item" and not a necessity. He stated that he was not sure why EIS was purchased and that although he did the research report on this system the report was not utilized by the computer

manager in the final decision. Captain Crawford stated that currently we are not conducting business any differently, in terms of hazardous materials response, than we did prior to EIS.

Captain Whisenant echoed Captain Crawford's views and added that no alternatives were explored prior to purchasing the system. He also noted that the system was much larger in scope than this department needed. Captain Whisenant stated that the system was labor intensive to set up and not user friendly. Furthermore, the fact that the weather station was not purchased to accompany the system made the plume dispersion model virtually useless.

The interviews revealed two main problems in the decision making process. A needs analysis was not conducted, as a result no true problem was identified. Personnel involved in the purchase of EIS did no look for alternatives to EIS.

DISCUSSION

In 1991 the RCFD purchased an Emergency Information System (EIS) to aid in the dispatch and management of personnel and equipment at hazardous materials emergencies. The RCFD is not using this system because it does not fit the department's needs. The purpose of this paper was to find out if a needs analysis was conducted by the RDFD prior to purchasing EIS and, if not, would a needs analysis have helped prevent the purchase of the wrong software program.

The research identified the importance of conducting a needs analysis as part of the planning and purchasing process. Zemke and Kramlinger (1982) pointed out the importance of ensuring that there is a problem to be analyzed , utilization of multiple sources of information to identify the needs, and prioritizing needs. McCardle (1996) felt that management commitment

was an important aspect of a needs analysis while Benjamin (1993) and Porter and Snead (1996) felt that stakeholder involvement was crucial.

The EFO student surveys showed that 100 percent (29 of 29) respondents believed that needs analysis is an essential part of planning. Sixty six percent (19 of 29) of the departments surveyed use needs analysis as part of their planning process and fifty two percent (15 of 29) use needs analysis prior to making major purchases. These results clearly indicated that today's fire managers believe in the importance of conducting a needs analysis.

The first step in a needs analysis is to ensure that there is truly a problem. As Wieder (1990) points out, there is not always consensus within an organization that a problem exists. The interviews with Captain Crawford and Captain Whisenant clearly showed that the RCFD did not clearly identify a need prior to purchasing EIS. Although Captain Crawford indicated that it would have been nice to have a data base that would aid in researching hazardous materials, he and Captain Whisenant agreed, based on the types of hazards the department deals with, there was no real need for a software program. Especially a software program as complex as EIS.

Zemke and Kramlinger (1982) indicated that using multiple sources of information to identify needs was very important to the needs analysis. Benjamin (1993) and Snead and Porter (1996) felt that stakeholder involvement was an important aspect of a needs analysis. Personnel that may have to use the system or are using the current system, should be included in needs identification. Cline and Siebert (1993) noted that interviews, group discussion, and questionnaires are useful for this purpose. Captain Crawford and Captain Whisenant stated that

although their input was solicited it was not heeded. Furthermore, there was no other stakeholder involvement by RCFD personnel on this project.

The third stage of needs analysis is to prioritize the needs. Zemke and Kramlinger (1982) indicated that at this point of the process alternative solutions should be offered to the needs identified. Captain Crawford and Captain Whisenant stated that although one other system was offered as an alternative to EIS, it was never researched or seriously considered.

Management commitment was identified by McCardle (1996) as a key element of a needs analysis. The firefighters surveys were of limited value to this research project, however the fact that only twenty six percent (9 of 34) firefighters said they could operate the system is an indication that management is not committed to this system. The fact that hazardous materials are currently handled the same way as they were prior to EIS is an indication that there was never a real need.

The study results clearly indicates that the information referenced in the literature review has clear implications on this fire department in the areas of needs analysis in general and specifically needs identification, needs prioritization, stakeholder involvement, and management commitment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In 1991 the RCFD purchased an Emergency Information System (EIS) to aid in the dispatch and management of personnel and equipment at emergencies. The problem is that the RCFD has spent a large amount of money on the purchase of this program and for the training of personnel to operate it. The RCFD does not utilize this system because it does not meet the department's needs. As a result the RCFD may not be managing emergency situations as effectively as possible.

The purpose of this paper was to discern if a needs analysis was conducted by the RCFD prior to purchasing EIS, and if not, would a needs analysis have helped prevent the purchase of the wrong emergency information management software program. Based on these premises and the research results the following recommendations are offered.

All senior officers in the RCFD should attend the Executive Planning course at the National Fire Academy. Hopefully this will instill an understanding of the need for strategic planning in the fire department.

After receiving training in the planning process the senior officers should provide training to mid-level officers on planning in general and specifically needs analysis. This will give the key decision makers within the department the ability to make more informed and justifiable decisions.

A needs analysis should be conducted before any major purchases are made or before any changes are made in departmental processes, policies, or procedures.

The RCFD mission statement should be re-written, disseminated, and explained to all personnel within the department. Managers should ensure that all members of the department have a clear understanding of the goals of the department. Members that clearly understand the direction of the department can offer valuable input to projects.

The EIS issue should be revisited using a needs analysis approach to see if this program can be salvaged or to identify alternatives. Managers should encourage input on this project from all personnel who may have a need to operate this system. Managers should also encourage stakeholder involvement in future programs or projects.

Training on strategic planning and needs analysis, clear cut department goals, and more stakeholder involvement should help the RCFD improve their decision making and planning process.

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APPENDIX A

Needs Analysis Survey

Instructions: The following survey pertains to the needs analysis phase of strategic planning. Please answer each question as accurately as possible.

What type of fire department do you work in?

Paid
Volunteer
Combination
Other (Example: Private contract)

Does your department serve a

City?
County?
Fire District?
Other? (Please explain)

What is the population of the primary area your fire department serves?

10,000 or less
10,001-25,000
25,001-50,000
50,001-100,000
100,000 or greater

What is your rank or position in the fire department?

Captain
Battalion Chief
Division Chief
Assistant Chief
Deputy Chief
Fire Chief
Fire Marshal
Other, (Please explain)

Do you or have you participated in major planning decisions within your department?

Yes
No
(If “yes”, please provide brief examples.)

Does your department conduct a needs analysis as part of their planning process?

Yes
No
(If “yes”, please provide brief examples.)

Do you believe that a needs analysis is important in the planning process?

Yes
No
(Please give a brief explanation for your answer.)

Does your department conduct a needs analysis for all major purchases?

Yes
No
(If “yes” please provide examples of recent major purchases.)

EIS Survey

Instructions: The purpose of this survey is to find out what you know about the EIS system. Please circle the appropriate answer and provide brief explanations when indicated.

1. Do you know what EIS is? **Yes** **No**
(If yes, please describe the purpose of this system.)

2. Do you know how to operate EIS? **Yes** **No**

3. Do you believe that EIS is a useful tool for Hazardous Materials responses? **Yes** **No**
(If yes ,please briefly explain.)

4. Briefly explain how EIS is used for a hazardous materials incident.

5. Do you believe that EIS is the best software package for our needs? **Yes** **No**